
EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION

A look at the social and emotional development of infants and toddlers

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a division within the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS). ECI programs provide services to families with children birth to 36 months of age with developmental delays or disabilities. For more information about DARS/ECI, call 1-800-628-5115 or visit www.dars.state.tx.us/ecis.

An infant or toddler's mental health refers to the child's ability to demonstrate developmentally appropriate social behavior and emotions based on individual characteristics, including culture, biology, environmental circumstances, and the quality of close relationships.

Because the term *mental health* is often associated with mental illness, infant mental health is sometimes mistaken for infant pathology. Infant mental health more accurately describes characteristics of infants and toddlers related to specific developmental abilities and has been well defined by internationally recognized professional organizations.

ZERO TO THREE, a nonprofit organization that works to improve the lives of infants and toddlers, defines infant mental health as "...the developing capacity of the child from birth to age 3 to experience, regulate, and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community, and cultural expectations for young children. Infant mental health is synonymous with healthy social and emotional development."

The World Association of Infant Mental Health, a nonprofit organization for science and education professionals that works to promote the mental well-being of infants, describes infant mental health as "... a field dedicated to understanding and treating children 0-3 years of age within the context of family, caregiving, and community relationships." *Infant mental health* is used to describe both the *state* of social and emotional well-being in young children and a *field* of practice and research. In both uses of the term, the child is considered within the context of the relationship with his or her primary caregivers.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, a collaboration of professors from several universities bringing the science of early brain develop-

ment to bear on public decision-making, recognizes that "young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development—intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral."

INFANT DEVELOPMENT BEGINS AND CONTINUES WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF AN EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIP.

Infants rely on their parents and other primary caregivers to help them regulate and over time learn culturally acceptable ways to respond to and express emotions. Infant development begins and continues within the context of an emotional relationship.

The role of relationships

Infants and toddlers with delays, disabilities, or other developmental challenges often need additional support to enjoy the same quality of experiences as children who do not encounter the same stressful circumstances. A relationship with a parent or caregiver who is able to put the child's needs first is likely to be the most important influence on the child's development. Infants and toddlers who experience secure attachments have an increased capacity to adapt to stressful circumstances that could negatively impact development (Zeanah, C.H. and P.D. Zeanah 2001).

In the past, research identified a link between children's experiences and their cognitive development. It is only in more recent research (Knitzer 2000) that

children's experiences were linked to their social and emotional development.

Infants and toddlers experience the world through the interactions they share with their parents and other primary caregivers. Therefore an adult's cognitive and emotional point of view is transferred to the baby. The baby exists in the context of the adult's experiences and how those experiences are shared within the context of their relationship (Winicott 1965).

ECI program staff members, including therapists, have the knowledge, skills, and ability to promote social and emotional development of infants and toddlers by providing a positive relationship-based approach to intervention. This approach is an integral part of routine service delivery.

ECI staff members employ strategies to support the development and enhancement of healthy, secure relationships of parents and primary caregivers (including teachers in early care and education programs) with infants and toddlers. With such supportive relationships, babies learn to self-regulate, express emotions, and make progress toward developmental milestones. ■